

Power is the Keyword

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Volume II

Perspectives - A Peer-Reviewed, Bilingual, Interdisciplinary E-Journal

Janki Devi Memorial College

University of Delhi

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Like other industries, the domain of book publishing is controlled by power. Consumerism plays its cards all so well to be conveniently called the governing force.

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From a little Bangla magazine *Baundule* (the vagabonds), to flourishing into a regional publishing imprint, called Hawakal, founded in suburban Calcutta in 2009; From Hawakal Publishers that worked exclusively for contemporary Bengali poetry to Hawakal Publishers Private Limited (HPPL) with a strong pan-India presence, backed by two gorgeous ateliers in New Delhi and Calcutta, and a dedicated e-commerce hub (hawakal[dot]com), HPPL has come a long way. They laid a significant landmark when they introduced the English language division back in 2015. With slightly above 260 titles in their kitty, Hawakal is proud of the books they relentlessly unlocked for global readers, especially during the Covid times. However, it took a great deal of hard work, patience, determination, and most importantly, a positive mindset that helped HPPL approach the goal they set for themselves. A handsome bunch of poetry books by both, emerging and established poets, quite a few fiction titles, a major travelogue, and a few non-fiction books were released during this period of much gloom and isolation. Above all, it was in November 2020, that HPPL introduced their first-ever all-colour, square-back coffee table book, *Shimmer Spring*, based on prose and poetry. Publishing in pandemic times will appear easy as you read these lines. Honestly, the achievements arrived with a fair share of failures. However, they are the ones that helped HPPL evolve even more as a publisher in demand. This essay will briefly discuss Hawakal's history from April 2020 to August 2021.

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It is a posh but small bookshop with supposedly excellent footfall in one of the sophisticated areas in Delhi. The space, as we first stepped in, was well-maintained, hosting books by all big houses. However, it seemed they mostly catered to readers fond of fiction and non-fiction titles. We were carrying ten notable titles we published of late, with a few poetry books among them. It was an attempt to inform the store about our works and understand whether they would keep our books for sale.

Only a handful of bookshops procure books straight from the publishers. Instead, not only in Delhi but across the nation, all major stores rely primarily on distributors for reasons that are best left for another discourse.

We were happy that this bookshop had no demands such as asking for a big discount and a justifiable credit period. However, except for three titles, they did not show much interest in poetry. The manager, as she claimed, seemed to be well-acquainted with buyers' preferences. So far, so good, but it was not over. We felt awestruck as she pointed at an anthology of food poems: 'I just hate the cover!'

Just a glance at the book, and the bookstore manager was ready to comment on the design! It was not the negativity but the attitude behind it which was disturbing. All books displayed at the store were not equally pleasing to the eyes. Could the manager have expressed her dislike so carelessly if a leading publishing house had used the same cover?

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All authors want to see their books displayed at the shops. This is quite a plausible expectation. As an author of some renown, I value the desire, but I ask myself: is it viable at all as a publisher? Bookstore availability is a challenge we often deal with, especially when it

comes to poetry. And for other genres of literature, availability may not pose a severe obstacle if the publisher has an amicable relationship with the distributors and, above all, if the author or the book in question is a sought-after entity.

On a recent visit to a reputed bookstore in Varanasi, we were shocked to know that the owner, a learned man conscious of the latest acclaimed publications, was unaware of a few books (both fiction and non-fiction published by big publishing houses), creating ripples on the social media platforms. However, he convincingly negotiated our doubt: 'I can tell you there is no such demand of those books you mentioned. And you know about our reputation — ours is the most frequently visited bookstore in Kashi'. So, what makes a book eligible to be found in a bookstore? Unfortunately, there is no easy answer. However, one can approach the riddle in ways more than one but the most crucial being 'demand!' So far, we have nurtured the influence of social media on readers, but this is not always a good criterion. One needs no formal training in Economics to grasp the supply and demand relationship.

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After working for close to 11 years in Calcutta, Hawakal opened its studio in Delhi in October 2020. It was amid the second unlock phase, and the preceding few months were spent renovating the tiny apartment they bought in the southern part of New Delhi. From April 2020 to August 2021, while continually coping with the ever-evolving precautionary measures for the pandemic crisis, Hawakal released 23 poetry books: five fiction titles; three non-fiction numbers; two memoirs; a major travelogue: *A Bengali Lady in England* (tr. Nabanita Sengupta, Sep 2020); and most importantly, six critically acclaimed anthologies: *Hibiscus: poems that heal and empower* (ed. Kiriti Sengupta et al., May 2020), *Open your Eyes: an anthology on climate change: poetry and prose* (ed. Vinita Agrawal, Aug 2020),

Shimmer Spring: prose and poetry (ed. Kiriti Sengupta, Nov 2020), *The Kolkata Cadence: contemporary Kolkata poets* (ed. Jagari Mukherjee, et al., Jan 2021), *Collegiality and Other Ballads: feminist poems by male and non-binary allies* (ed. Shamayita Sen, May 2021), and *Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English: 2020-2021* (ed. Sukrita Paul Kumar and Vinita Agrawal, Jun 2021). (use UC in headings) Moreover, during this period, Hawakal collaborated with the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS, Shimla) to bring out veteran poet K. Satchidanandan's new collection of travel poems, *No Borders for Me* (CLASSIX, Feb 2021). Also, in addition to working with the Indian authors, they published American poet Dustin Pickering's newest volume of poems, *The Stone and the Square* (Mar 2021). Thus, in the time when the entire world went through a terrible economic crash when civilisation witnessed one of the most fatal challenges for survival, a two-man company poured in their best efforts toward publishing literature leading to 40 books in 16 months! The survey remains incomplete if I do not state the activity of their Bengali language division. Hawakal published 21 Bengali titles in those days, among which one was a sparkling new collection of short fiction, *Landmark* (Jul 2021), by Bitan Chakraborty (founder of Hawakal). The other was the Bengali rendering of Dr. Y. B. Satyanarayana's iconic memoir, *My Father Baliah*, by ace translator Saubhik De Sarkar (Oct 2020). To conclude, we published 61 books in the said period! I do not know whether one can have another instance of similar output in any corner of the world.

As Hawakal planned to address availability and establish a relationship with a national distribution company, they got bogged down by significant issues like print run and pricing of the books. Distributors (they are the middlemen of this industry), acting as connectors between the publishers and bookstores, demand a whopping discount from the publishers, and one hardly enjoys a chance to negotiate the figure; one can not question them; nor can one bargain.

What followed was a major revision in Hawakal's book publishing policy — focusing more on fiction and non-fiction than poetry, enhancing the initial print run, adhering to offset printing instead of the POD (Print On Demand) technology, working on book pricing, and more. Coming out of a comfort zone was not an easy task. But if asked, what compelled them to make their products bookstore-compatible, the answer will be consumers. When I say consumers, I don't hint at bookshops or distributors, but 'authors and readers'. It is noteworthy that authors are some of the prominent 'consumers' of books.

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In 1955, John Bugas suggested consumerism as a substitute for capitalism towards the American economy. Bugas's explanation aligned with Austrian economics founder Carl Menger's vision of consumer sovereignty, whereby consumer preferences, valuations, and choices control the economy entirely. The concept opposed the Marxian perception of the capitalist economy as a system of exploitation. Vance Packard challenged the meaning of the term consumerism, implying excessive materialism and waste [Source: Wikipedia].

With limited resources, Hawakal is striving hard to reach out to more consumers. Does that imply they support capitalism? Although the pandemic has been instrumental in mobilising online sales, there are readers (and authors) who prefer to buy a book from a bookshop after flipping through several collections. Buyers hegemonise the economy of a nation. After all, as a publisher, Hawakal has to emerge as a reader-friendly publishing enterprise that values consumer opinion as much as they respect their understanding of literature.

About the author:

Kiriti Sengupta, the 2018 Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize recipient, is a poet, editor, translator, and publisher. He has authored eleven books of poetry and prose; two books of translation and edited eight anthologies. Sengupta's poems have been published in *The Common*, *The Florida Review Online* (Aquifer), *Headway Quarterly*, *Moria Online*, *Amethyst Review*, *Madras Courier*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *The Lake*, *Mad Swirl*, *Otoliths*, *Outlook Magazine*, among other places. He is the founder and chief editor of the *Ethos Literary Journal*. Sengupta lives in New Delhi. More at www.kritisengupta.com